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# The Little White Outlaw

## By James Oliver Curwood

THEY say the beaver was a great maker of history; that it was he, as much as man, who had to do with the opening up of the Great West. One historian says that the Oregon Trail was paved with beaver pelts, and that if it had not been for the beaver and pursuing man the unknown West would have remained an unknown West for half a century longer. The beaver, in his days of extinction, is written down; but there is a smaller brother in the Far North that the Crees know as "the little white outlaw of the snows," who has never come into his own and possibly never will. For this little white brother, so small that you could hide him in the hollow of your two hands, did more than open a west—he opened a new world; he was the reason for the beginning of the earliest and the oldest industry on the American continent. It was because of him that there came into existence the world's oldest and for centuries its most powerful trust—the Hudson's Bay Company—which not so very long ago owned a quarter of all Canada.

Today, when this little outlaw's brother invades a henhouse down in civilization he is spoken of quite contemptuously as a weasel; but six hundred miles north, where his pelt grows as silky as a woman's hair and as white as driven snow, in a temperature of from forty to sixty degrees below zero, he is still known as the royal and ancient friend of kings and empresses—the ermine—"the savagest of all living creatures and the bravest," says Lord Strathcona who, in the days when he was plain Donald Smith, was one of the greatest hunters and trappers in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company. Fur-buyers from Montreal, Ottawa and Winnipeg will now penetrate far into the forests and pay from one to two dollars for this pelt; but in those days, more than two and a half centuries ago, when Prince Rupert formed his "company of gentlemen adventurers" and secured a charter that he might "hunt the ermine in the wilds of the New World," thus founding what became the Hudson's Bay Company, the ermine was actually worth more than his weight in gold.

At that time the price of his little pelt went as high as one hundred dollars, and it is known that the Chevalier Grosselier, who came over with a number of other French gentlemen adventurers to get ermine, did "barter one black fox for the skins of twelve ermine," something over two and a quarter centuries ago.

Once I came upon the trail of a big northern rabbit and I knew by the trail that an ermine was fastened to the rabbit's throat. I found the dead animal—fifteen or twenty times the weight of its assailant—a rifle-shot distant, with its brains eaten out. At another time I came upon a spot in a balsam shelter where the little pirate of the snows had tackled a frigate too powerful for him. He had attacked a huge white snow owl—and lay mangled and dead on the scene of battle.

Last year, as nearly as can be estimated, about a hundred thousand ermine were caught in Canada, going mostly to London and Paris; and this is considered a big catch, in spite of the fact that one can travel scarcely a quarter of a mile over the snow without encountering fresh trails of the tiny animals. No other animal approaches them—unless it is the fox or the wolf—in the cleverness with which they evade the tricks and traps of the most artful fur-gatherer. In the snow their movements are so quick and elusive that it is impossible for human eyes to keep track of them for twenty consecutive seconds when they are in motion. I have fired at one of them, and from thirty or forty feet away he has been laughing at me, so to speak, by the time the shot reached the point where he was. He is the only animal in the North that is quicker than the jaws of a steel trap. Two years ago I had a twenty-mile trapline running through a deep swamp near Nipigon House, and on one of my rounds I came up quietly to find an ermine investigating the trap house. From behind a log I watched him. In a few moments he stepped on the pan of the trap; and simultaneously with the "give" of the pan he rose into the air like a flash, so that when the jaws came together he was safe—a foot above them. I reset the trap and he came back to the bait immediately. Three times he sprung the trap. It was with some regret that I shot him while he was nosing about the house, but it was an act necessitated by the fact that he would have spoiled my chances of getting the fisher cat I was after.

Of the same family, the mink and the ermine are the deadliest of enemies. The ermine is quicker and, were it not for his foolish courage, could always evade his more powerful foe. As it is, he often dies in the unequal fight; and after he is dead the mink tears his hide from his body and leaves him on the snow. Whenever one finds the other in a trap it means a profitless catch for the trapper, for the one that is free seldom leaves the other until he is torn and mangled. There is something of truth in the words of the factor at Nipigon House, who said to me: "The great Hudson's Bay Company may die, but the little devil who started it—the ermine—will go on living forever." He will.

Taken from SATURDAY EVENING POST, 24 Feb. 1912. Article loaned by Judy Eldridge.

# The Other Woman

Continued

a hard, cold voice.

"He is dead," she said. "He died six months after—after—we were married, Tom. I've suffered—more than I can ever tell. I've been punished. Oh, Tom, I've been punished."

"And he left you his money?"

Her eyes lit up at the eagerness of his question.

"Yes—yes—I am rich, Tom. And it is yours, all yours! Oh, you will forgive me—you will forgive me—you will take me back——"

Her arms were about him again; her bosom throbbed against his breast.

He did not speak. His arms hung at his side. For a time he stared hard and unseeing at the wall. Then, so tenderly that a red flush of triumph surged into her face, he kissed her and pushed her away from him. The harshness was gone from his face. She saw a wonderful peace in his eyes.

"He left you—plenty of money?" he asked gently.

"Enough to last us always," she cried. "Nearly—nearly a million!"

Her white fingers were clasping and unclasping in the filmy lace at her breast.

"We can travel," she went on, excitement glorifying her eyes. "We can go where you have always wanted to go. You need never work again, Tom—never—never." She emphasised the words almost shrilly.

He held out his hand and led her to the door. It was a white, pure night. Over the top of the earth the pole star gleamed like a mellow moon. The Great Dipper shone like a constellation of suns. Under the glorious sky the wilderness lay black and silent and peaceful. She looked into his face, and marvelled at its quiet happiness.

"You have made me suffer—terribly," he said in a low voice, "but I do not lay it up against you. No, I do not forgive you to-night, Isobel, because I forgave you long ago—up there." And he pointed into the North. "I am glad he left you the money. It will be a reward for your suffering. I hope you will be happy—always. And I——"

"And you——" She trembled.

"See!" he cried, pointing again to the dazzling star. "Up there I went, wrecked and shattered, soul and heart gone, and I found peace. A woman—a girl—gave them back to me. What would you have me do?"

"We will pay her," whispered the woman who had been his wife.

"Yes, we will pay her," he repeated, and his face was illumined with the joy of the thought. "And what do you think would be fair payment for the saving of a man's soul?" he asked.

"Ten thousand—twenty thousand—more, more, if that is not enough."

He was tightening his belt.

"I am going to pay her—on Christmas Day," he said quietly. "We are going to be married then. Good-bye, Isobel, and may God bless you—always."

Like a shadow he slipped away into the white gloom of the night, into the North.

Taken from CASSELL'S MAGAZINE OF FICTION, May 1917. London, England.